

i just wanna be ok by thenewromantics

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Summary:

ted wheeler dies on a tuesday afternoon at the end of march.

mike tries to move on.

aka the ted wheeler death fic that no one asked for

i just wanna be ok

Author's Note:

hello my beautiful, wonderful friends. so funny story about this one shot. i started writing it back in march, it was one of the first big ideas i had for a st fic that i just ended up abandoning when i got stuck. today i decided to revisit it and thought that i would try and finish it. 3k words later (as i had already written the first 2k), and this fic is now complete.

i've always thought that ted wheeler dying would be the perfect plot point on st, so this is my interpretation of how i would want it to go! enjoy!

March 31, 1987

It happened on Tuesday.

Mike was laying stomach down on the floor of the Hopper living room, his history notes scattered around him as he tried to figure out exactly what he needed to study for his test the following day. Ever since El and Hopper had moved out of the cabin and into a real house when El's year of confinement was over, it had been a common place for Mike to spend his time.

At the current moment, Mike was sprawled out diagonally across the floor, his legs bent at the knee and his sock covered feet twitching nervously in the air. El was using him as a pillow, her head pressed up against the middle of his back as she read *Little Women* for what seemed like the hundredth time. It was her current favorite and Mike was honestly surprised that the spine of the book was still intact considering how often she was reading it.

Despite being given the all clear be out in the open with the rest of them for over a year now, El still had yet to enter high school with the rest of them. It had been her own decision, she wanted to be

normal and do things that normal kids did, but she was afraid that high school would be overstimulating, which Mike totally understood, even if that meant that absolutely *no one* believed him when he told them he had a girlfriend, she just didn't go to school with them.

This meant that moments like these were Mike's favorite. He did his homework here almost every day, it being quiet and away from the constant arguments and tension that existed at his own house. Sometimes the entire party was there, all of them working on school work or distracting each other with some silly argument. Sometimes it was Mike, El and Will, who was under Hopper's watchful eye while his mother was at work, or it was Mike, El and Max, who needed a place to be if Lucas was busy and her step dad was home.

But Mike had always preferred it when it was just the two of them.

And today was no different. When Mike had first arrived that afternoon after getting out of school, him and El had gone for a walk. Hands brushing against each other, they had made their way down the railroad tracks, quietly filling each other in on the other's day, El recounting the difficult math paper that Hopper had told her to do while Mike retold the funny story Dustin had told at lunch about his mom's cat.

By the time they had returned to El's house so Mike could work on his homework, there was a face splitting grin on Mike's face. It had faded as the hours ticked on, but that was more due to the amount of studying he had to do than anything else. He still felt his lips quirk up into a small smile whenever he felt El head moving against his back, and he had to refrain from laughing when he could hear her gasping at things that were happening in the book that she definitely *knew* were going to happen.

He was happier then he had been in a really long time. Life couldn't get any better.

It could only get worse. So much worse.

Because what goes up must come down.

Mike is reading up on Lincoln's Gettysburg address when the phone rings. The sound barely registers on his radar, he assumes it's the station calling for Hopper, who does Mike and El the decency of staying at the dining room table when they're in the living room together, something Mike is eternally grateful for, or Joyce, calling to confirm what time her and Will should be over for dinner.

(Hopper and Joyce insist that there's *nothing* going on between them, that they have dinner together almost every night because El and Will are friends and it makes so much more sense to just all eat together. El, Will and Mike - who spends almost every night eating dinner at El's house these days - all politely disagree.)

The noise doesn't distract him, his eyes comb Lincoln's speech, his lips mouthing the words as he reads it for the nine hundredth time, it feels like. El sighs loudly, adjusting on the floor, her head nudging his spine. He throws her a small smile over his shoulder, which she doesn't notice as her eyes are glued to her book.

Mike isn't pulled from his work until Hopper comes into view in the doorway. Neither him or El sit up at first, El hardly being bothered to put her book down, and Mike still half looking at his notes when Hopper clears his throat to get their attention.

When Mike finally does look at Hopper, his stomach drops. Hopper's face is pale, and he looks like he's just seen a ghost. Both him and El clamber up to a sitting position, sharing a look.

"Mike, that was your mom." El's hand reaches across the carpet to intertwine with his. He has no idea what's going on, but he squeezes her fingers anyway. "She wants me to bring you down the hospital, something happened to your dad."

His blood runs cold and a loud buzzing noise assaults his eardrums. He can faintly hear a strangled gasp come from El but he doesn't acknowledge it. He feels both everything and nothing all at once and it isn't until Hopper's hand claps his shoulder firmly that he swallows and takes a deep breath.

He can only nod at the older man, who's regarding him sympathetically, waiting for him to react. El's hand is still gripping

his, a light squeeze being applied to his fingers every couple seconds, almost as if she's trying to remind him that she's there.

"You too, El." Hopper says, nodding at his daughter, who wordlessly gets to her feet. Since she refuses to drop Mike's hand, he too feels himself get to his feet.

Before he realizes what's going on, El's helping him into his jacket and Hopper is getting shoes on his feet and he feels like a little kid again, who needed his mother's help to get ready to go off to school in the morning.

The last coherent thought that Mike has as he's pushed out the door by his girlfriend and her father is that he's probably going to fail his history test in the morning.

Six hours later and Mike is the only one awake in the waiting room.

It's nearly midnight at this point and the hospital is cold and dim, making Mike wish he was anywhere but here. Holly is passed out against him, her chin pressed against his upper arm and her hands gripped around the thin fabric of his t shirt. A couple chairs down, his mom is nodding off, her forehead against her hand and her chest rising and falling slowly.

Other than his mom and his sister, the waiting room is nearly empty. There's a receptionist behind the counter, but even she has her arms across her chest and her breathing is heavy as she dozes.

Mike wishes El was still here.

Her and Hopper had hung around for a few hours, El's hand refusing to leave his as Hopper kept his mom distracted by talking with her about the upcoming school budget vote. El had wanted to stay until there was any news, but after she was unable to stifle her fifth yawn in the span of ten minutes, Hopper had finally had it and dragged her away.

There had been a small silent argument between the two of them that Mike was accustomed to at this point, but eventually El caved. Although, it was only after Mike gave her the smallest smile he could muster and kissed her with the promise of calling her in the morning that she seemed the slightest bit comfortable leaving him there.

The room hums and Mike hears a distant cough from somewhere down the hallway.

He hates hospitals.

A nurse appears in his peripheral, looking at the tired family and Mike shakes his mother awake, careful not to disturb Holly. Karen snaps awake, smoothing out her shirt instantly and standing, almost as if she had never been asleep to begin with.

Mike watches as his mother disappears down the hallway, side by side with the nurse until they're standing a considerable distance away from him and his sister, who is still fast asleep against his arm.

He can't hear them, but he sees the slump of his mother's shoulders and the wobbling of her knees and in the gut of his stomach, he knows.

His watch beeps with the promise of a new day.

April first, new beginnings, a clean slate.

Ted Wheeler is dead.

He doesn't go to school the next day.

Even if he had gotten a decent amount of sleep the night before (which he definitely hadn't), he still would have elected to stay in bed all day instead. He isn't even really sure when he left the hospital and came home.

He's pretty sure somewhere between two and three am he was being escorted out of the waiting room by Hopper, who had whispered to him as he helped Mike into his bed that El had no idea he was there and didn't know what had happened.

Mike didn't ask any questions.

He doesn't know how long he lays there, head against the pillow staring up at the blank ceiling of his bedroom. His chest hurts with the threat of incoming tears, but no matter how hard it gets to breathe, they never come.

The sun comes up, his mom comes home. Door shutting quietly and muffled cries echoing around the house, she shuffles from room to room. Holly's bedroom door opens and Mike's heart breaks. She didn't know yet and Mike wasn't sure if his mom was going to be able to keep it from her.

He can hear the muffled noises of his mother and sister in the kitchen and he screws his eyes shut, willing the world to take him away from here. Take him somewhere where his little sister doesn't have to experience this heartbreak at such a young age, where his mom doesn't have to try and handle this all by herself.

Holly screams, the noise echoing around the house, which already feels emptier and more desolate without his father. Which Mike doesn't quite understand consider it certainly never felt like home with him around.

Mike hates this.

He feels a sob bubble up in his chest and before he knows it, he's heaving in deep and angry sobs. Angry at the world for hurting his mom and sister. Angry at Nancy for not being here. Angry his dad for leaving them like this.

Angry at himself for not being the person that his mom and sisters will need him to be.

When Mike wakes up, the room is dark and his eyes are heavy with sleep and the tears shed. He doesn't even remember falling asleep.

As he sits up in bed, his stomach rolls with nausea and he barely makes it to the bathroom before he's releasing everything in stomach. Not that there was much to begin with, it's been hours since he ate anything. Now that it's empty, his stomach rumbles with hunger but the idea of eating is just about as appealing of vomiting again.

Slumped against the toilet, he lets out a small content noise as his sweaty forehead hits the smooth and cool porcelain.

Nancy appears in the doorway, her cheeks covered in dry tear tracks and her eyelids puffy. The sight surprises him for a couple reasons, one he had no idea she was even home, and two he can count the amount of times on one hand he's seen Nancy cry that hard. It hurts.

"You look like shit." She remarks, her lips curling up into what looks like is supposed to be a smirk, but there are cracks where another batch of tears is threatening to spill over.

"So do you." He croaks, his voice thick and muffled with sleep and his earlier sobs. There's a beat of silence and Nancy looks like she wants to see something but instead she turns away from the bathroom and disappears down the stairs.

The front door opens and shuts behinds her.

He's alone again.

The house is eerily quiet. Sure, it's the middle of the night, seemingly, he hadn't had the chance to look at the clock before sprinting into the bathroom, but everything is still, which is rare. No coughs, no bed creaking or throat clearing from his father. The lack of noise makes his hands twitch nervously and he's almost afraid he's going to vomit again. Screwing his eyes shut and clenching his hands into fists, he rests his forehead on his knees and desperately wills for their to be a sign of life.

He never thought he would see the day where he missed hearing his

parents muffled arguments, or the clanging of plates and silverware during an otherwise silent dinner. Mike never would have thought that his father brought life to their house, but now without him, it seemed lifeless.

With a soft muffled sob, that's half swallowed out of embarrassment and half covered by his legs and arms, Mike shakes his head. He feels like the world is coming down around him and he suddenly feels like he can't breathe. And the worst part?

He knows that it's only going to get worse.

Ted Wheeler is buried on Friday.

Mike awakes in the morning much like he had all week, disoriented and exhausted even after hours of dreamless sleep. His body argues and fights with him as he drags himself out of bed and he groans when his feet hit the floor.

He can hear the faint voices of his mother and Nancy downstairs, something that makes Mike happier than he likes to admit. His mother had barely talked to anyone for days and Nancy was out of the house more often than she was home, so hearing their voices almost brings tears to his eyes.

Making his way down the stairs, his mother and sister both cease their conversation when they hear him. He can see the glimmer of tears shining on his mother's cheeks and Nancy's face is pale and there are bags under her eyes, like she hadn't gotten any sleep (Mike knew the feeling), and it all feels like a punch to the stomach.

"Hi, sweetie." His mom says, coming around the counter to stand in front of him, her hand running through his hair. Mike swallows the lump in his throat, willing himself not to show too much emotion. "We're going to cemetery at ten, so why don't you take a shower and get ready."

It's not a question, Mike knows that. It's a soft demand, and Mike can only nod. He tries to ignore the gnawing sensation he feels, the annoyance building in his gut about being treated like a child who doesn't get to know what's going on. He can tell whatever his mom and Nancy were talking about was important, and he wants nothing more than to be involved.

It just makes him feel like he's not a good enough replacement for his dad. That he's not worthy of being the man of the house. That he's not strong enough to take care of his family and do what they need him to do.

He leaves the kitchen without another word.

As he gets ready, he can hear Nancy and Holly in Holly's room and his stomach twists uncomfortably. Holly still doesn't understand what's happening, and the way she talks about their dad, like he's going to come back and be home soon, makes him hate the world. Holly doesn't deserve any of this.

It's raining by the the time they get to the cemetery. Mike's uncomfortable in his suit, his tie tied haphazardly, as his dad never properly taught him, and no one in his family is making eye contact. Before Mike can realize he's even there, Hopper is shuffling Mike into one of the seats next to the open grave, his hands squeezing Mike's shoulders.

The gesture almost makes him cry.

Mike barely registers that there are other people around him. In the back of his mind, he knows that his friends are probably all there, a various people from around town. He can hear their voices like a faint whisper, but his eyes are trained on the coffin in front of him. He feels a hand resting on his leg and he doesn't need to look to know that it's El.

She doesn't say anything, but just the weight of her hand grounds him and lifts the burden off of his shoulders, even if just a tiny bit.

The funeral itself is tired and boring, much like his father himself. His mom and Holly cry, each one of their sniffles and light sobs hitting

his heart in a way that made him want to throw up. Nancy was next to him and Mike could hear her deep breaths, but one look at her face told him that she wasn't crying and she didn't plan on it.

Mike didn't cry.

Somehow that fact made him even more upset.

After all is said and done, Mike finds himself in the corner of his living room. He's not exactly sure how he got here, he has vague memories of Hopper helping him out of his seat and getting in the passenger seat of Nancy's car but it was all a blur. His friends are standing in a small semi circle around him, and El's hand is holding his forearm, her touch being the only thing anchoring him to reality.

"This sucks." Dustin said. Mike didn't know if it was the first words spoken since they had been standing there, or if there had been a conversation going on around him. Dustin was looking down at the ground, frown lines present in the creases of his face.

Mike takes a quick look around at his friends and the sight of them all makes his stomach twisted. Dustin and Lucas have tear tracks present on their cheeks, their eyes puffy. Will's nose is bright red, a sheer sign that he had been crying, and his cheeks are colored. Even Max, who had only met Mike's dad a handful of times, was still wiping at her cheeks. El's was the worst, especially because Mike knew her tears were partially for him, not just his dad. He couldn't even bring himself to look at her.

It all made him sick to his stomach.

All his friends, who knew Mike's dad as the looming, harsh figure who would interrupt their DnD sessions and chastise them for cursing, were crying for him. They were feeling pain and it was showing all over their faces.

Mike, on the other hand? He hadn't even managed to shed a tear.

Yeah sure, he had cried since his dad had died, but almost none of it was because of his dad, himself. He had cried, deep and angry sobs, for his mother being alone. For Holly having to live so many years of

her life without a father. For so much responsibility being left behind in his passing.

But none of his tears were for his father. Who was dead.

God , he was the worst fucking son in the entire word.

He suddenly felt like he couldn't breathe. Everything was crashing down on him and the stuffiness of the Wheeler living room, filled with various members of his family and Hawkins citizens was having him pull at his collar. There was a sweat collecting on the back of his neck and his upper lip.

His stomach rolled and El's hand felt like a million ton weight against his arm.

Without thinking, he jerked away from her, the bile crawling up his throat quickly. Pushing through the crowd, he sprinted up the stairs, not giving a second thought to anyone downstairs. He could hear Nancy calling him and there were footsteps following him, but he ignored them.

Bursting into the bathroom, he hunched over the toilet and released the contents of his stomach. He had hardly eaten anything in the last week or so, but his had forced himself to consume some of the hors d'oeuvres, afraid if he didn't put something in his stomach that he would pass out.

He vaguely is aware of the door opening, and promptly closing behind him. A hand comes to the center of his back, firm but gentle, a soothing stroke of a thumb coming along with it. He doesn't have to pull his gaze up to know that it's El. He knew that she had been worried a lot about him the last couple days, and he doubted that sprinting from the wake to vomit in the upstairs bathroom probably wasn't helping quell that worry.

Wordlessly, he hears her adjust around him. He still hasn't pulled his eyes away from the toilet bowl, but he hears the running of the faucet and the setting down of a glass somewhere to his right, before El's hand is back on his back.

Her presence is a comfort. The previous day El had come over to keep him company, everyone else was at school, Holly included (their mom had wanted to keep things as normal as possible for her, which Mike understood). Nancy was with Jonathan and his mom was off with Joyce to make arrangements. El had sat at his desk chair all day, hardly speaking, working on something Hopper had left her to do. She never tried to force him to talk, just sat there while he laid in bed, not quite ready to face anyone in the world, but grateful for the company.

“I puked a lot after the upside down.” She says after a couple minutes of silence. Mike doesn’t look at her, but his ears perk up. “And after the gate.”

Tilting his head slightly, Mike finally meets her gaze. Her eyes were significantly less puffy than they had been downstairs and somewhere between the living room and the bathroom, she had lost the sweater she was wearing, leaving her in just a t shirt and black jeans.

“I just remember it would happen almost every single morning.” She continued without waiting for him to reply. “Hop used to tell me that my body was just trying to get all the bad stuff out, and that it meant that I was slowly getting better.”

Mike swallowed roughly, reaching for the water and gulping it quickly, grateful that it was still cool. “Really?” He croaks out, his voice rough and low. It’s the first word he’s spoken in days, so his vocal cords are stiff from lack of use.

El nods. “I didn’t believe him though.” She sighs, a weird pained expression coming onto her face. Mike’s hurt lurches in his chest, they’re at a wake for his father and she’s forcing herself to relieve awful, *horrible*, memories all to try and make him feel better? It made him hate himself all the more. “I didn’t think that anything that’s supposed to make me get better would be so awful.”

She shrugs, her hand beginning to rub small circles on his back. Guilt crawls up Mike’s spine. “This is only the second time it’s happened.” He mutters, shrugging his shoulders. “So I don’t know if it’s working.”

El doesn't say anything, merely giving him a small smile and Mike's heart brightens a little bit in his chest. Unlike all the other smiles he's gotten recently, there's no pity hidden in the corners, and Mike almost has the energy to give a smile back.

"I should probably go back downstairs." He whispers, rubbing his hand through his hair and letting a small sigh escape his lips. "My mom is probably wondering where I am." He knows that's probably not true, his mom probably didn't notice he had even left, but he vaguely remembers Nancy calling for him as he came upstairs, so his absence hasn't slipped by completely.

Without another word, Mike pushed himself into a standing position, giving El a look that he hopes portrays everything he wants to say to her. *Thank you . I don't know what I'd do without you . I love you .* She nods, understanding.

As he exits the bathroom, he feels tears pooling in the corners of his eyes. He adds it to the mental tally he's keeping in his head.

He still hasn't shed a single tear for his dead father.

He's not sure yet if he's okay with that or not.

Slowly but surely, life goes on.

Nancy goes back to school. She leaves on an early Wednesday morning, before the sun has risen. The hug she gives Mike is tight and reassuring and while she doesn't say anything, he knows what he's trying to tell her. He'll see her again soon, and things will be okay. Someday at least.

He goes back to school too. It takes a couple weeks, but teachers are sympathetic and give him plenty of time to catch up. It's definitely not easy though, he spends a lot of his time thinking about his mom, and about Holly and about how it's going to take a lot of time to get things back to any semblance of normalcy.

That's not for lack of trying, though. His mom is certainly making her best effort to get the family back on its feet. Sure, they can live off of their dad's savings for a little bit, but his mom knows they're going to need an income to keep all the things they've grown accustomed to. Soon enough, for the first time in his life, his mom has a job.

So, some of the changes that are happening are good.

Not all of it is good though, Mike feels like other parts of his life have been tilted off their axis and aren't just quite *right*.

The Party being one of them. It sucks, really it fucking does. But, Mike just feels so, burnt out. Every time he's with all of them, he feels like he can't breathe. His friends are apologetic and tell him they understand, but guilt still twists at his gut whenever he has to leave the arcade early or not spend the night after watching a movie.

El is the only constant in this life.

She's understanding, almost to a fault, where she tells him to take breaks and take steps back when she can see him putting himself in over stimulating situations. She lets him nap when she's over at his house, or he's at hers. They spend hours just sitting in silence, and it's exactly what Mike needs.

Today is one of those days.

It's a rainy afternoon at the end of April. Mike is feeling kind of, *off*. He had been called into the guidance counselor's office to talk about his progress. They had talked about his dad, about how he had died, ("Really bad heart attack." Mike had said, his voice catching slightly), but still, no tears.

It had been almost a month and he still hadn't cried.

It made him feel like *absolute shit*.

"El." He said suddenly, the thoughts swirling in his head, almost dangerously at this point. Part of him doesn't even want to admit this to himself, but also part of him thinks he needs to get this off his chest, and El is the perfect person to do that with.

"Yeah." She turns from where she's standing at her bookcase. "Is everything okay?"

Mike sighs, suddenly feeling nervous. He sits up on El's bed, his eyes looking at anything but El, not quite ready to meet her eyes yet. "Am I bad person?"

The question isn't exactly what he wants to ask, but it's all he's able to form. Immediately El is climbing onto her bed and sitting in front of him. "Of course you're not." She says, grabbing his hands and forcing him to look at her. "Why would you think that?"

He shrugs, suddenly feeling small. It feels like there's something lodged in his throat and he desperately swallows, trying to clear it. "I don't know." He mutters, even though he knows exactly why. One of El's hands lets go of his and drop down to his knee, where she squeezes it encouragingly.

"Mike, whatever reason you have for thinking you're a bad person, you're wrong."

El's words don't really help much, and suddenly Mike's ears are ringing. "I didn't cry after my dad died." He says, nearly interrupting El as she had been opening her mouth to speak again. He can see a look of confusion crossing her face and Mike's stomach clenches. "I mean, I cried, but not because I was sad."

El still looks confused, but she nods, encouraging him to continue. "I cried because I was mad. I was mad that my mom was alone, that Holly didn't have a dad anymore. I cried because I didn't think I would be a good enough replacement, that I wouldn't be strong enough to take care of anyone. I cried because I hated my dad for leaving."

Fat, wet tears are now rolling down Mike's cheeks before he can even notice them, and damping El's duvet. El doesn't speak as she moves so she's next to him, wrapping her arms around her shoulders to comfort him. Without even thinking, Mike pillows his head onto her shoulder, wiping his cheek against the fabric of her shirt.

"It's okay to be angry." She says after a moment. "Being angry

doesn't make you a bad person."

Mike knows that she's trying to make him feel better, but there's still a wave of guilt that washes over him and jolts up and down his spine. He pulls away from her, not harshly, but still firmly. He can't read the way she's looking at him, but his tugs at his heart.

"My dad is dead. He's six feet underground, gone. Never coming back and I can't even find it in me to be at all upset." Mike practically scoffs. He can feel his blood pressure rising and his hands have started to shake. El's not moving, but he can see in her eyes that she's not scared. This helps him push on. "What kind of human being doesn't shed a single fucking tear when their own father dies?"

His voice is nearly at a shout now and El is still looking at him with the same expression on her face and Mike doesn't know if he has any other words to say. "I'm never going to see my dad ever again and while it sucks that he's gone, I don't miss him. Not in the way that a son should miss their father."

Something breaks in Mike then, like a dam cracking open. Tears are now falling freely from his eyes and his chest practically bursts as loud, heavy sobs choke out of him. El's arms are immediately around him and she holds him while he sobs. He's pretty sure her dad is home, but no one bothers them.

Mike doesn't know how long they stay there, eventually he feels his heartbeat begin to return to normal and his breathing slows. El's grip doesn't loosen, and for that Mike is grateful. Her touch is the only thing keeping him afloat.

"Mike." She whispers, almost like she can sense he's ready to talk about it. "It's okay to be angry at your dad. It's okay to not be sad." Mike screws his eyes shut, almost afraid he'll start crying again. "Everything you feel is okay."

Pulling slightly from her arms so he can look at her, Mike swallows roughly. His throat is dry and course from all the crying, but he hardly cares. "Why is it okay?"

El gives him a small smile, her eyes watering. "Because, you never

have to feel anything. You're allowed to be angry at your dad, you're allowed to not be sad. Your dad was never the dad that you deserved and it's okay to be angry about that."

Tears flood his eyes again, but this time they're not sad tears. They're grateful tears. Grateful for this girl, this wonderful girl with the biggest heart Mike's ever seen.

"There's nothing bad about you. There's nothing wrong with you." She continues, her hands moving so they can cup Mike's cheeks. Absentmindedly, he nuzzles her thumb with his hand, a ghost of a smile on his lips as she grins; wide and dimpled. "You're wonderfully good just the way that you are. Everything is going to be okay. You're gonna be okay."

Mike can't help the next words that come out of his mouth, but they tumble out before he can stop them. "You promise?"

El smiles, her eyes shining and Mike's heart, for the first time in almost a month, almost bursts out of his chest with happiness. "I promise with everything that I have."

Everything's going to be okay Mike thinks with a small smile, a real one, gracing his face. Even if things don't seem like it, they will be. Everything will be okay.

He'll be okay.

Author's Note:

well, i hope you all enjoyed this! it was pretty angsty (i think), but i tried to be optimistic with the ending. exploring mike's mind is something i find SO fascinating especially when it comes to ted because of how...not present their relationship is. i hope i did it justice. please let me know what you think!

thanks for reading! :)